

Los Angeles Times Magazine

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the twins as teens

Since Their Saccharine
Days on 'Full House,'
Mary-Kate and Ashley
Olsen Have Become as
Pervasive as Pokémon.
Now, at 13, They're
Giving New Meaning to
the Term Baby Mogul.
By Carolyn Ramsay

[ALSO IN THIS ISSUE]

Napoleon Chagnon's Waterloo

Looks

A Hair-Raising Experience

Very First Person

Investigating His Family

Home

Ahead of the Curve in Palm Springs

the olsens inc.

Mary-Kate and Ashley Are
the Best-Known Twins in
America. You May Find Them
Cloying, but It's Time to Take
Them Seriously—if Not
as Actors, Then as a
Business and a Brand.

by carolyn ramsay

photographs by catherine ledner

It's 5 p.m. and the glass walls of a 12th-story conference room in Century City are filled with pink-streaked sky. Inside, five cyber-execs shake hands with two look-alike girls who have agreed to test drive the *kidsroom.com* section of the company's new *familyroom.com* Web site.

• "We hope you guys can play the executive producer roles and give us your feedback," a vice president says as the twins admire the laptop computer displaying the site. • "It's small enough that I can reach all the keys," Mary-Kate Olsen says. Then she examines the site itself. "Color wise, it looks like Christmas." • Adds sister Ashley: "She sees Christmas, I see watermelons. Also, when you hear kids' room, you think younger kids." • After a few more comments, the girls' nanny says it's time for the eighth-graders to go home and study. The executives, who are talking to Joan Lunden and Leeza Gibbons about headlining other areas of their family-friendly venture, are pleased. "They gave us a lot of honest, open feedback," says another VP. "It's because of Mary-Kate and Ashley that we're going with a hipper, edgier look." • Remember the bug-eyed, rubber-cheeked twins who alternated as the baby on "Full House"? They're 13 now. And they're business executives. Five years after ABC canceled the sitcom that made them famous, the girls have emerged not as stars but as a brand—like Legos or Cheetos. While other former child actors file for bankruptcy or grab unseemly tabloid headlines, these waif-thin girls sit atop a multifaceted business worth about \$60 million and a com-



Mary-Kate, left, and Ashley: The babies from "Full House" are 13 now.

bined personal fortune of at least \$17 million. "They have earned more than Macaulay Culkin and Shirley Temple combined," says their lawyer and manager, Robert Thorne, "and they have saved more."

The girls' company, Dualstar Entertainment Group, Inc., is going through a growth spurt to parallel their emergence as teens. By capitalizing on their hip new sensibility as well as their wholesome little-girl selves, their licensing empire is expected to draw youngsters into its merchandising web while continuing to grow up with the twins' established peer audience. An upcoming cartoon, "Trenchcoat Twins," for example, is a spinoff of a video series about grade-school gumshoes that the Olsens shot when they were 6 years old. The Internet site, their new Mattel doll and an upcoming clothing and accessories line, on the other hand, draw on the girls' blossoming image as teen fashion mavens. The first software product in their expanding line, a Game Boy cartridge rushed to stores in time for Christmas, sold out in two weeks. The twins also want to be directors someday, and their company's new mini-studio will allow them to produce and eventually direct movies that they don't star in.

"Over this past year, we've been getting more involved," Ashley says. "We're old enough now to understand everything and know what's going on and what should be going on." She pauses over her angel hair pasta at Spago. Her voice exudes confidence. Yet something in her look suggests that she has come to expect such proclamations to be met with a patronizing grin, if not an *ooh-how-cute* cheek pinch. With their lighter-than-air cherubic image, the twins always have been underestimated and misunderstood by adults—even as media-savvy kids were turning them into a lucrative commodity. Their ascension into adolescence, however, coincides with corporate America's dawning recognition that little girls are big business. It may be time to take the Olsen twins seriously.

MARY-KATE AND ASHLEY PROBABLY WON'T UNDERSTAND FAME'S IMPACT on their lives until they're adults. Right now, they seem quite knowing about where they are on the maturity/sexuality/astuteness continuum of American adolescence. In Thorne's office one afternoon, they go over their schedule and wardrobe for a promotional trip to New York. While they curl up together on an overstuffed couch, their full-time stylist, Judy Swartz, suggests that they wear a certain beaded skirt for an appearance on the "CBS Morning News." Thorne asks whether they'd wear a short, belly-exposing top with the hip-hugging skirt. "How many inches can you guys show? How much do you feel comfortable showing? You've got to tell her so she knows," he says, nodding toward the stylist. Clearly the girls already have made known the precise parameters of their fashion comfort zone—one that is a closer to "Melrose Place" than "Little House on the Prairie"—"Friends," maybe. Exasperated, they reply in unison: "She knows!"

Before the Olsen twins were Hollywood's most successful teen businessgirls, they were TV's adorable babies. More than a dozen years ago, their mother, Jarnette Olsen, went shopping with a friend and tagged along as the woman dropped by the office of her child's agent. Jarnette happened to mention that she and her husband, Dave, had 6-month-old twin daughters. The agent asked to see pictures, then offered to send the girls to audition for the role of the baby on a show about a widower raising three daughters with the help of two buddies. The twins landed the role and "Full House" became "The Brady Bunch" of the '80s and remains one of ABC's longest-running sitcoms.

Jarnette and Dave, who divorced in 1994, were never typical stage parents. They managed their daughters' lives on "Full House" by making sure the babies were well cared for and, as they got older, well educated. "It was the first time (Jarnette and Dave) had ever been around anything like this," says Bob Saget, who played the girls' father on the show. "They were just parents. They were always there. *Always.*"

Despite their presence on the set, neither parent caught on that the girls were stealing the show. After two years, other stage mothers pulled Olsen

aside. The toddlers were the stars, they pointed out. And they were still earning SAG scale. That's when Olsen hired Thorne, a record industry lawyer who had represented pop star Prince. Thorne got the girls' salary upped from \$4,000 an episode to \$25,000, which climbed to \$80,000 by the series' last year.

When the girls discuss their work on "Full House," they describe it as a game. "It was almost like 'follow the leader' or 'Simon says,'" recalls Ashley, who is more talkative than her more athletic twin. "The woman who used to be our teacher would say something like, 'Walk in the room and say, 'You got it, Dude,' ' and we'd walk in the room and say 'You got it, Dude.' We would just copy everything that she said to do. Then they would cut her voice out in post-production."

They weren't conventionally beautiful babies, but Mary-Kate and Ashley conveyed a wide-eyed, adorable innocence that audiences, particularly kids, loved. Soon a children's book publisher, Parachute Publishing, caught on that "Full House" had a huge following. In 1990, Parachute published a \$4 paperback featuring Michelle, the character played by the two Olsens, and her older sitcom sister, Stephanie. The

they're cruising through life in a limousine driven too tiny for a regular sized computer keyboard—are

book, based on an episode of the show, sold 70,000 copies. Parachute cranked up the presses for more and soon launched a series based solely on Michelle. Parachute has published 100 Olsen titles since then and plans to come out with two new Olsen books a month into the year 2001. A key to the series' success, according to Parachute vice president Susan Knopf, is that 80% of all children's books are read to, or by, girls.

The paperbacks served to cement the bond between the Olsens and their audience. Most of girls' play, according to a Mattel spokesperson, revolves around best-friend themes. Girls say that what they like about Mary-Kate and Ashley is that they're permanent best friends; they're so close that they even share the same face. "Since they're twins, they kind of like always have a best friend around them," says Christine Chun, an 11-year-old Olsens fan from Los Angeles. "I'd like to have someone who would always be there, like a best friend who lives with you."

The Olsens themselves say that aside from the twin factor, their success stems from familiarity. "I think that's almost exactly what it is," says Mary-Kate. "They feel like they're close to us because they've seen us grow up—or, well, we're still growing up. On most TV shows, they have babies on for about a week. Then they get rid of them and have 2-year-olds. Most kids just stop, but we kept going and doing videos and doing movies and it kept growing from there."

And growing. And growing. The girls' first album, "Brother For Sale," sold 325,000 copies. A follow-up venture,

"Our First Video," sold 400,000. In 1992, "Full House" producer Jeff Franklin cast the twins in a TV movie, "To Grandmother's House We Go." They each earned a mere \$125,000 to play Julie and Sarah Thompson in the holiday comedy. But the Nielsen ratings were a shocker. The movie made it onto that week's top ten. Thorne and his partner snapped their briefcases shut and headed to ABC to negotiate. "We walked away with a 13-episode series commitment [the show, "Two of a Kind," aired six years later] with a million-dollar kill fee. Three telefilms on anything we wanted and it was a green light," Thorne recalls. "That's when I knew. That was the turning point."

Thorne created Dualstar and hung the title of "executive producer" on its owners' 7-year-old shoulders. Since then, the company has produced about 30 direct-to-video romps that have grossed more than \$400 million. The videos have spawned several additional book series as well as the "Trenchcoat Twins" cartoon. Even after "Full House" was canceled in 1995, the videos continued to sell well. "Two of a Kind," launched in 1998, failed to capture



The twins in 1992: Though not conventionally beautiful, they conveyed an innocence that audiences loved.

Carolyn Ramsay's last piece for the magazine was a profile of Jared Diamond, author of "Guns, Germs and Steel: The Fates of Human Society."

an audience and was canceled quickly, yet it too spawned a book series that kids continue to buy. What's odd is that the Olsens have maintained an amazing level of acceptance among the sub-teen audience without ever becoming a fad. Pokémon and Harry Potter may have been on the cover of Time magazine. But according to Q scores—the industry's main measure of who's a household name—the Olsen twins, even without a current TV show or hit movie, are the most popular, recognizable young Hollywood stars among American kids—girls and boys—between the ages of 6 and 11. "It astonishes even us," says their publicist.

In 1996, as the twins' success rocketed, the Olsens quietly divorced. Shortly thereafter, Dave married his current wife, McKenzie, with whom he has two children. Jarnette remains unmarried; she and Dave share custody of their four children, who move back and forth between households. By all accounts—including those of a watchdog group set up to police greedy stage parents—Dave

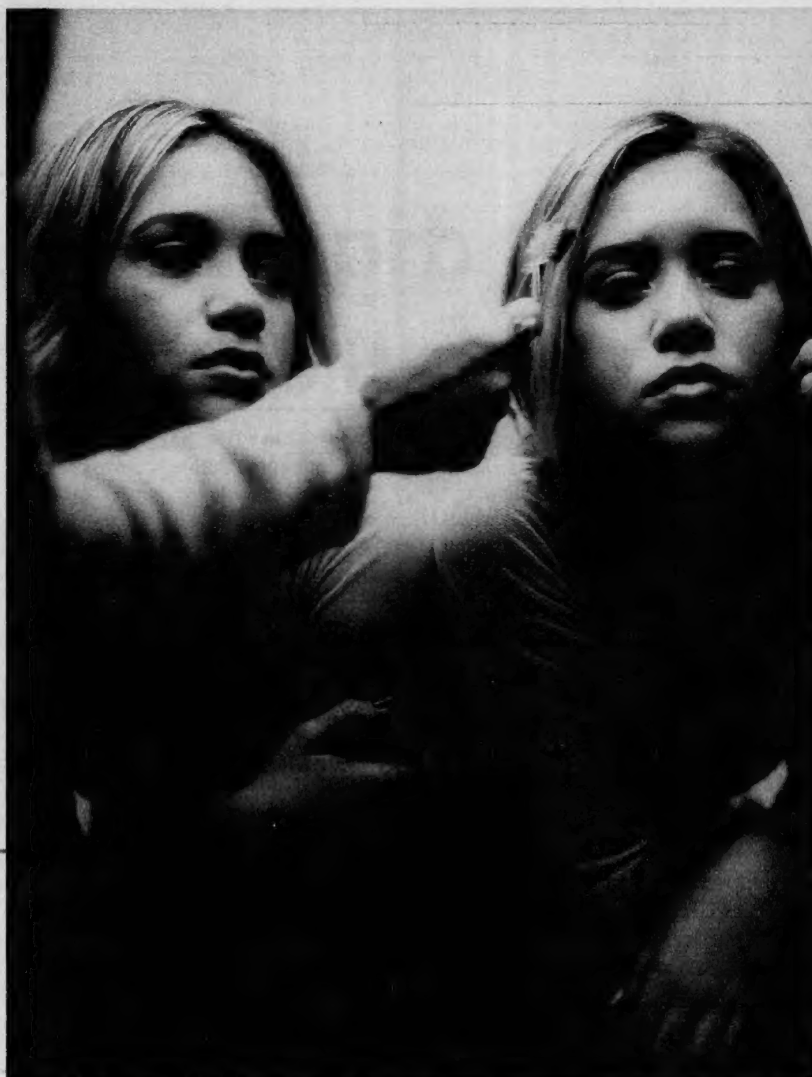
en by adults, but their hands—hands still reaching tentatively for the steering wheel.

and Jarnette continue to pursue their daughters' best interests. Thorne says they have access to less of their daughters' income than they are entitled to take by law and they place more money in trust for the girls than the law requires. The girls' business does not support either household. And while both parents maintain upper-middle-class lives, people who know them say neither lives lavishly. Neither mother nor stepmother works—"not with all of those kids," says Dave, who now has six children (Jarnette stopped talking to the media long ago). He has had to cut back continually on his own work schedule because of the demands of the girls' career, which often involves shoots on location or promotional tours. "Just this summer, we had five weeks in Toronto, we had another three and a half weeks in Paris. Then we had [an] Alaskan cruise, which was 10 days. So obviously it would be difficult to have a commitment to a specific job. And that's just part of it. That's just playing babysitter."

The laconic amateur golfer and commercial real estate investor now oversees Dualstar's finances while leaving the detailed decision-making to his daughters, Thorne and other staffers in the expanding production company. Just keeping track of his daughters' contracts is a huge job, he says. "Time is just getting so much shorter with the six kids and with the direction the girls are heading. They're actually forming mini-companies in all these different areas. You can just imagine the mountains of memos I receive on a daily basis on all these contracts. It's becoming all-time-consuming."

He says he doesn't think of the twins as multimillionaires because he drives them to sleepovers and tells them to clean their rooms just as he does his other children. The girls say they aren't interested in money (although when pressed, each says she wants a Range Rover when she grows up). Dad plans to start explaining the financial intricacies of his daughters' business to them next year. For now, he stresses that they must learn to take responsibility. "They know they have financial advisors. They understand their money's invested in stocks as well as the bank. I try to educate them that there's a system in place that I want them to continue with when they get older. That is extremely important, especially before they turn 18," he says, referring to the age when the money reverts to their control.

ALTHOUGH THEIR EXECUTIVE PRODUCER JOB IS MOSTLY A SINECURE, FOR six years the twins have owned the copyright on every video, book and album that bears their name. The girls had resisted merchandising beyond



those items. But when Mattel approached them last year about dolls with the twins' faces, things changed. Suddenly, the wide-eyed Munchkins were old enough to express strong opinions about how the dolls should be dressed and marketed. They had been highlighting their hair for about a year, and as they lost their baby fat, they were emerging as very pretty young girls with a style they describe as "simple but funky."

While Hollywood smirked at the Olsen twins, the business community—based on reports from retailers, video distributors and booksellers—saw the girls as Princess Midases. America's infatuation with youth was soaring and as huge retail chains replaced Main Street specialty shops across America, they filled their shelves with name-brand products. "The retail base is only going for established names," says Eileen Fitzpatrick, Billboard magazine's digital entertainment editor. "That's the most important thing in entertainment today: branding."

Besides inking deals for the dolls (as well as the video games and the cartoon), the company recently signed with a New York licensing agency, the Beanstalk Group, to cut deals for a line of hip girls' clothing, accessories and cosmetics that is tentatively called MK&A. Beanstalk co-chairman Michael Stone says the Olsens interested him because their empire is built on the solid foundation of books. "For an entertainment property to be successful over the long term, we believe it has to consistently deliver a fantasy to the core audience. Mary-Kate and Ashley fulfill for girls the fantasy. Girls want to be like Mary-Kate and Ashley." Weston Anson, a consultant in La Jolla who specializes in the evaluation of intellectual property, estimates that with the re-

Continued on Page 34

Main courses are equally hit and miss. The kitchen does a good job with the fish of the day. I especially liked an ample cut of escolar accompanied by cabbage-wrapped zucchini. The 10-ounce hamburger with *pommes frites* is an expert burger, delivered with the classic fixings and sandwiched in a bun that's neither too hard nor too soft. The *frites*, by the way, are among the best in town.

One night, on an evening when Marder is at the restaurant, the dry-aged New York steak is charred rare and as juicy as they come, with a deep, beefy flavor. It's not prime, but it's flown in directly from the Midwest. Looking forward to that same steak on another evening, however, I'm disappointed. The beef isn't nearly as good, which I chalk up to the vagaries of meat suppliers. Veal *daube* is not ideal either. Cloaked in gravy and draped with slivers of *shiitake* mushroom, the meat is tender but without much flavor. And while I enjoyed the sliced London broil in mushroom *jus* one night, on another, the strongly flavored *jus* overrides the taste of the beef, and the mashed potatoes are gluey. The meatloaf isn't much better. And I'd avoid pasta altogether, especially the overly rich, extravagantly sauced spaghetti carbonara.

Marder definitely has the right idea about dessert, though. Consider the tall wedge of "homemade" apple pie. With a tender crust coated with sugar crystals, it makes one wonder why hardly anybody makes pies anymore. What can be more American than apple pie à la mode, when the ice cream is a ball of old-fashioned vanilla? "Dr. Bob's" banana split, a pretty composition of banana, vanilla ice cream and a good dark fudge sauce, is well worth sampling, too. The plate of cookies, though, suffers from Continental leanings. What are those fashionable biscotti and dainty palmières doing with those nice sugar cookies?

It's about time L.A. chefs give American cuisine its due. What I appreciate about Brentwood is its modest ambition. Instead of offering a big, blustery menu, Marder is working on a manageable one, executing it reasonably well much of the time. He's kept the prices moderately high as opposed to expensive, but he'll still need a crowd for this small venue to work. That may be why he plans to make it a late-night spot. Let's just hope there are enough night owls out there to fill the tables, or this appealing neighborhood restaurant may end up on the endangered species list.

Olsens

Continued from Page 13

cent deals in place, the Olsen brand is worth about \$60 million. "The unique thing is that they are a juvenile or 'tween' phenomenon and they really exist, as opposed to Nancy Drew or Barbie," he says.

So far, no one is comparing the Olsens' acting ability to young Jodie Foster's, and few are projecting that they'll have the impact on Hollywood of little Ronnie Howard. Variety gave "Two of a Kind" a "C" rating and called it "formulaic." Entertainment Weekly referred to the twins as the "Stepford scamps." Someone at Billboard said: "I cannot take another one of these stupid Olsen twins videos."

The twins don't read their reviews unless Thorne faxes one to them, an arrangement befitting where they are at this moment: poised between innocence and budding independence. But as the business world discovers girl power, the Olsens seem to be finding themselves.

At a casting session for their "You're Invited to Mary-Kate and Ashley's School Dance Party" video, each twin chose which actor would play her boyfriend. They also told the writer that some phrases were dated or inappropriate for teenagers. "I wouldn't say 'crazy,'" Ashley offered at the late-afternoon meeting around a conference table in Beverly Hills. "I'd say 'frustrated' or 'upset.'"

"Done," the writer replied, making notes on the script.

For a recent spate of appearances on news shows, Swartz, their stylist, bought \$680 worth of fabric and had pants tailor-made for them. The total bill was \$2,150. What 13-year-old girl wouldn't love this level of attention to her wardrobe? "I've been taking them from a child look to sophisticated fashion trendsetters," Swartz says. "The girls are very fashion-oriented. They're fashion-forward. They're into clothes and like to look good."

One afternoon at Thorne's office, the lawyer sits near them on the edge of a couch and presents various items for their approval. The girls are tired. Mary-Kate has a headache and a sore throat. Ashley is eager to go home and write a school essay that's due the following day. They've complained—without success—that Thorne has scheduled too many satellite-feed TV interviews during a promotional trip to New York. "Twelve is too many, Robert," Ashley says. "OK," he teases, "let's spend a couple of weeks and

fly to all these cities to do the interviews. This way it's two and a half, three hours and you're out, you're shopping in SoHo." They don't raise the issue again.

When Thorne passes them cover photos for a new interactive CD-ROM, they groan, almost in unison. "These are the worst pictures I've ever seen in my life," Mary-Kate says with flat affect, as though she's simply stating fact and isn't particularly upset by the pictures. "Look at my teeth. I'm going like this," Ashley adds, biting her upper teeth across her bottom lip sideways.

"It's a hippie look," Thorne explains, adding a joke about the psychedelic '60s: "People took stuff back then."

He's kidding and Ashley knows it, but she rolls her eyes in that distinctly adolescent gesture that says *what a total loser*. "Hopefully," Ashley says, "that's not a message we're trying to get across."

It's one of those intriguing moments in the twins' public-private lives. They're cruising through life in a limousine driven by adults but their hands—hands still too tiny for a regular-sized computer keyboard—are reaching tentatively for the steering wheel. Back and forth they go from self-assurance to insecurity. Just like every girl. But with a decidedly Olsen twist.

After an appearance on "Good Day L.A.," Ashley asks Thorne if adults take them seriously when they say they want to direct.

"Of course," Thorne says.

Ashley nods and replies: "Because I want to say, 'I also want to be really active in running my company,' but I think they'll laugh at me."

DOMINIQUE MOCEANU, THE Olympic gymnast who "divorced" her parents to gain control of the money she earned, says that since the twins have been working all their lives, they are probably accustomed

Solution To This Week's Puzzle: "Harangue Man"

M	O	T	E		Q	U	A	F	F		K	A	S	B	A	H		I	B	E
A	T	O	P		U	P	F	O	R		I	N	T	O	T	O		M	E	X
N	O	W	I	D	O	N	T	W	A	N	T	T	O	G	E	T		I	D	I
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S	D	S		S	T	R	A	T	A		N	A	M	E	D		D	Y	E	R

RESOURCE GUIDE

BEAUTY, Pages 22-23: Canale Salon, Beverly Hills, (310) 273-8080.

HOME, Pages 24-27: Jersey Devil, Seattle, (206) 543-7144; Gale McCall, Inglewood, (310) 677-2664.

GARDENS, Pages 28-31: Passionflowers are available through many Southern California nurseries, including Kartuz Greenhouses, Vista, (760) 941-3613; Rogers Gardens, Corona del Mar, (949) 640-5800; Desert to Jungle Nursery, Montebello, (323) 722-3976.

ENTERTAINING, Page 32: Pumpkin seed oil is available through Carmen's European Deli, Santa Monica, (310) 452-1019; Alpine Market, Torrance, (323) 321-5660.